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# Some Principles for Designing Effective Parenting Education/Support Programs

*Professor Dave Riley*

*University of Wisconsin-Madison/Extension*

**P**arents are struggling today.

Here are some ways we know this is true:

- ❖ Over 4,000 Wisconsin babies (about 1 in 20) are born each year at low birth weight, most due to poor prenatal care.<sup>14</sup> These high risk infants require extra medical care that is expensive, and is easily preventable. It is one cause of the next indicator:
- ❖ Babies are more likely to die before their first birthday in the U.S. than in 18 other nations, including Hong Kong, Singapore, and Spain. The rates in Wisconsin are better than in most of the U.S., but we still lose about 600 infants a year.<sup>15</sup>
- ❖ Short of infant mortality, the most extreme measure of problematic child-rearing is the official rate of child abuse and neglect. We do not know the actual incidence of abuse, only how much abuse was blatant and public enough to be reported: in 1990, over 38,000 cases in Wisconsin.<sup>16</sup> These abused children cost us plenty, not only in heartache, but also in increased costs to our criminal justice system, as these children are at significantly increased risk of violent and criminal behavior, which leads us to our next indicator.
- ❖ Juvenile arrests in Wisconsin rose more than 11% in the five years between 1985 and 1990. Juvenile arrests for homicide tripled in that same period. But most startling is the sheer size of our juvenile crime problem: nearly 100,000 juvenile arrests in Wisconsin per year.<sup>11,12</sup>
- ❖ The academic achievement scores of even our best children show that we are falling behind the rest of the industrialized world. Compared to school children in Japan or Taiwan, children from excellent U.S. schools begin with the same abilities, but fall further behind in mathematics performance with each year in school.<sup>13</sup> By the fifth grade, only one U.S. child appeared among the 100 top scorers in mathematics achievement, leading to the prediction that the U.S. will not be among the countries with the most and best engineers and scientists in the early 21st century. We know quite a bit about why this is so; much of it has to do with differences between their schools and families and ours, and many of these differences are within our power to change.

- ❖ By the 9th grade in Wisconsin, 30% of youth report they got drunk (had 5 or more drinks in a row) in the past month. By the 12th grade, the rate is 49%, about half of all students. While parents are far from the only cause of alcohol abuse, it is also clear that simple parenting skills can make a difference: parents who monitor their children's activities (who know where their children are, and who they are with) have 9th graders who are about 8 times less likely to get drunk than those who do not.<sup>10</sup>

### **Community leaders view "Parenting" as a top priority for state effort.**

In 1990, the University of Wisconsin-Extension assessed the most important perceived needs of state residents through a Strategic Planning exercise. In a systematic process used in every Wisconsin county, 1,849 local community leaders (ranging from PTO presidents to bank presidents and farm co-op managers) met in small groups across the state. Their task was to identify the major concerns of the people in their counties (upon which the University Extension service should prepare itself to respond). When the priorities from each county were compared, four concerns were consistently ranked high across the state: water quality, solid waste management, youth risk behaviors (e.g. drug use, pregnancy, suicide, violence, etc.), and parenting. The parenting issue actually subsumed a variety of more specific concerns. Citizens across Wisconsin perceive an array of societal ills, in areas ranging from school achievement to societal violence to issues of character and values, and see these as having a common contributing factor: ineffective parenting.

### **Do We Know What Competent Parenting Is?**

Parenting seems like such a personal matter, and children are all so different from each other, that we might wonder if there can be any agreement on what "competent parenting" is. To a surprising extent, researchers can agree.<sup>5</sup> The greatest agreement is in the infancy period, where the characteristics of competent parenting are most strongly influenced by biology, and least by culture.

With increasing age, competent parenting is increasingly defined by the cultural context; a society that depends upon hunter/gatherers raises its children to have different skills and attitudes than does a society based on agriculture. Similarly, a democracy must raise a different kind of citizen than an authoritarian regime. And cultures also differ in values that are not related to their economies or politics; for example, a talkative child (and adult) is more highly valued in the dominant American culture than it is in Chippewa society, and therefore "competent" parenting must be defined differently within these two cultures.

Thinking just of U.S. culture in this era, researchers can give a surprisingly coherent picture of competent parenting across the years of childhood. The picture will have some variations depending upon the gender of the child and the subcul-

***We cannot really grasp where we are going until we better understand our past.***

ture, social class, and family structure of the family structure of the family. The picture is complex, and will not be summarized here.

Researchers are also quick to admit that their knowledge is incomplete. But it is fair to summarize that, to a surprisingly great extent, researchers can observe normal interactions of parents and their children at home, and from these observations can predict quite a bit about children's later compliance with adults, cooperativeness with peers, empathy with the distress of others, aggressiveness across their childhood years and into adulthood, school failure or success, and many other outcomes of interest to most parents.

Much of the complex picture of parenting that is painted by research findings can be summarized in terms of (1) the development of a secure attachment between the child and one or more parents in infancy, and (2) the use of authoritative parenting in the years of childhood and adolescence. Secure attachments derive from parenting that is sensitively responsive and reliably available to the infant. Authoritative parenting is a style that combines high demandingness (high expectations for the child, a willingness by the parent to exert authority, set rules, act consistently), and high responsiveness (expression of warmth with the child, a willingness to listen to the child's point of view, to engage in verbal give-and-take with the child, a willingness to explain the reasons for the parent's rules). Hundreds of research studies document that children who experience secure attachment relationships and authoritative parenting are much more likely than other children to "do better" in almost any way that you might ask about. They are less resistant with their parents as two-year olds; they are more cooperative with peers as preschoolers; they get better grades and get drunk less as teenagers.<sup>5</sup> Research also documents that we know ways to help parents establish secure attachments and become more authoritative in their parenting.

### **But Do We Know Enough to Mount Effective Programs to Improve Parenting?**

The short answer is "yes." First, we have some examples of specific programs which have proven successful in rigorous evaluations. For example, a treatment-control group, experimental field trial of UW-Extension's Parenting the First Year newsletter series, using a sample of 1,104 Milwaukee area parents, showed that parents who received the newsletter report having to spank or slap their babies significantly less often than did non-recipients.<sup>8,9</sup> Based on these results, Extension can claim to have prevented over one million instances of babies being hit by their parents in Wisconsin last year.

One of the most exciting innovations in parent education in the past two decades has been the development of various kinds of home visitor programs for new parents. These are more intensive and expensive than the newsletter series described above, but they also have larger impacts. They seem especially well suited to parents who are identified as "at risk" of parenting difficulties, and who may therefore need more intensive help. Rigorous evaluations of home visitor programs, using treatment-control group (experimental) research designs, have

shown them to be effective at preventing child abuse, reducing childhood accident (emergency room) rates, increasing IQ, increasing secure attachments, and reducing the number of subsequent pregnancies by the mothers.<sup>4,6</sup>

In the early adolescence period, the work of Gerald Patterson and his colleagues is exemplary in showing that we can have consistent positive impacts on distressed families who are struggling to raise an aggressive, delinquent, or noncompliant child.<sup>7</sup> The program focusses on training parents in specific child management practices, like how to convey clear expectations for acceptable and unacceptable behavior, how to respond effectively to noncompliance, and how to reward children's prosocial behavior. One of the most encouraging findings reported by Patterson's team is that this training program leads not only to a decrease in problem behavior among the target children, but to significant improvements in the behavior of their siblings as well.

The three examples above were cited because they have more rigorous evidence of impact than most, but virtually every parenting program in the state can tell stories of individual successes: parents who themselves give credit to the parenting resource center, or workshop or home visitor, for a dramatic change in their lives as parents. These stories, when heard first-hand, can be very convincing.

But, equally important as specific program evaluations, we are also able to extract from the research literature the general principles of successful Parenting programs.<sup>1</sup> We can summarize the most important of these principles:

- (1) Successful programs are **ecological**. Rather than focussing exclusively on just one aspect of the issue, typically the parent's behavior, the most successful programs affect the systems surrounding the parent and child as well. As in other areas of behavior change, the evidence from parenting programs shows that it is usually fruitless to try to change an individual without simultaneously changing the environment to which the individual is adapted. An ecological intervention might focus as much on the availability of secure jobs and family-friendly workplace policies as on the contents of parents' minds.

An ecological intervention that more directly effects the parent's behavior might be one that changes neighboring patterns so that parents have available more sources of childrearing advice and practical assistance. This could be accomplished through home visitor programs or parent discussion groups, each of which could help establish a "sense of community" for parents. This kind of thinking has led some experts to argue that we ought to invest as much in parent support as in parent education. Some evidence supports this idea; for example, home visitor programs for new parents are effective even when they use volunteer home visitors (not professional educators) and when they have little or no curriculum they attempt to teach.

- (2) Successful programs are often **collaborations**. This follows from the first principle: since most organizations can respond to only part of the ecology of parenting, ecological programs typically require the collaboration of community groups. Successful programs often require that community organizations and agencies move beyond their usual ways of operating, to become partners in more intensive and community-wide efforts, or establish well-organized systems of referral.
- (3) Successful programs are **long-term**. A single-session program may be appropriate for some goals, such as to reassure parents about their childrearing efforts, to introduce them to a few new ideas, or to describe a more intensive parenting program. But there is no evidence that one-shot workshops with parents have any consistent or lasting effect upon serious childrearing difficulties. The Wisconsin Children's Trust Fund, for example, has a policy of not even awarding grants to child abuse workshops that last for fewer than 8 sessions.
- (4) Successful programs have **terrific staff**. One review of 48 parent education program evaluations found that who led the workshops was more important than the specific curriculum used.<sup>2</sup> Little research exists to tell us about what makes one staff member more effective than another, or how best to train staff. But people in the field generally agree that the staff member's interpersonal sensitivity, skill at leading small groups, and personal emotional health are crucial, regardless of the staff member's formal educational background.
- (5) Successful programs tend to be **targeted to specific ages and outcomes**. They do not try to make everything better. They have clear goals, focusing on something specific like preventing child abuse, or getting parents to talk with their teens about sex. They are also targeted by age, since advice to parents of teens and infants must be so different.
- (6) Successful programs intervene at **critical periods** in the family life course. This means they intervene to prevent problems before they are well established, and they intervene at family transition points when parents are most receptive to learning (e.g. the first year of life; at parental divorce; at step-family formation; at child's puberty).
- (7) Successful programs **build on parents' existing strengths**, rather than focussing on their weaknesses. This is really true of all behavior change. Focussing on deficits makes people feel incapable and defensive, so that they are less likely to take the chance to experiment with new ideas or skills. All people have strengths and abilities, and effective programs recognize and build upon those abilities. Successful programs are open to all; they do not require parents to prove they are failures or "at risk" before giving them services.

- (8) Successful programs allow for **individual differences**. The best advice is best only in a probabilistic sense: it will work most of the time for most parents, but it will not work for every parent in all circumstances. As any parent who has had a second child knows, what works with one child may not work with another. The best programs are not rigidly dogmatic. Rather, they are tolerant in allowing differences, and in recognizing the parent as the final authority in deciding which advice fits best with their child, culture, and family values. A corollary of this principle is that the program will likely be more effective if parents themselves have some say in its design.

Based on these principles, can we develop a standard parenting program for the state? The answer is both Yes and No. There are efficiencies to mounting a standard program, but a standard program should never be simply adopted, but rather should always be adapted to the specific families.

**Any program we mount, to be successful, should be tailored to fit at least the following:**

- (1) **The age of the child.** A parenting program for parents of teens must be very different than one for parents of infants. There is no single thing called “good parenting” that remains constant across the several developmental stages of childhood.
- (2) **The issue or outcome.** A parenting program whose aim is to increase children’s academic achievement will be very different from one to reduce child abuse or delay teen sexuality. Programs targeted to the infancy period may be the exception, since physical, cognitive, and socio-emotional development of the child (and the parenting practices promoting that development) are so closely linked in infancy.
- (3) **The locale and subculture.** Like the natural ecology, social ecologies also vary. We cannot assume (as we once did) that causal processes will remain constant across changes in ecological habitat, whether that ecology is defined in the natural or social world. For example, an authoritarian parenting style is related to better school grades for Asian-American youth, but lower grades for most other American groups.<sup>3</sup> Another example: encouraging parent-child conversation (especially elaborated and responsive language) in the early childhood years makes good sense in most American groups, since it predicts later literacy and success in school. But it makes little sense among most Native Americans, for whom talkative children are not a high cultural value.

- (4) In some cases, by **the family structure**. The “new demography” of the American family shows a varied set of arrangements, including prominently single-parent households, blended families, and 2-earner families. Each occupies a different niche in the social ecology, with its own opportunities and constraints, and programs for each type will often differ. For example, the two years of parent-child relations following a divorce follow a course very different from parent-child relations in intact families, and the research literature allows us to make highly specific and useful suggestions to parents in that family structure.

So: a one-size-fits-all parenting program is unlikely to work. We can produce standard, statewide programs, which support parents’ near-universal desire to do their best in raising their children well. But these programs must be specific to content and age of child, and will usually need to be tailored to the specific locale.

Further, our preconceptions about the needs of any particular locale must always be questioned. How can we sift the real from the perceived needs of parents in a community? Whatever we do, we are well advised to begin by assessing local needs and local supports for parenting; by hiring (and listening to) staff from the communities to be served; and by giving local programs the authority to run themselves, so that local variations in the programs are possible.

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*Dave Riley, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor of Child and Family Studies, University of Wisconsin-Madison. Dr. Riley is a Child Development Specialist with UW-Extension.*